AED/LearnLink

ICT Applications for Development

AED/LearnLink uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support development. Activities range from public access telecenters to teacher training, professional development, organizational networking, e-comerce, e-government, and institutional capacity building. Lessons from field experiences are shared to contribute to the body of knowledge on using ICTs for development.

Location: **Ghana**

Keyword Identifiers: telecenter, NGO, IT, training, professional development

Purpose: To support local development by providing Ghanaians with affordable access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as specially produced or purchased multimedia materials, for business, lifelong learning, and networking; to help local NGOs establish, manage, market, and operate sustainable Community Learning Centers (CLCs) housing the ICTs; and to provide USAID and partners with lessons for establishing successful NGO-run telecenters. Overall, the activity was designed to enable Ghana's entry into the information economy, on a small scale, to connect target communities with new information collection and dissemination options, provide more efficient ways to communicate and network, and begin opening doors for tourism, trade, and diverse, new industries.

Description: Through this pilot project, three CLCs are established in different regions of Ghana. The CLCs provide a mix of products and services adapted to the local context, including basic business services such as photocopying and faxing, more advanced ICT applications such as word processing, spreadsheets, Internet browsing, email, and desktop publishing, plus multimedia materials, produced and procured, relevant to local needs. Each CLC monitors usage and designs new products and services to meet clients' demands. The CLCs are run by local NGOs selected for their standing in the community, good business practices, receptivity to change and new ventures, and innovative leaders willing to take risks.

Ghanaian women browsing the Internet at a CLC

Mary Fontaine

Outreach–through radio announcements, talk show interviews, inauguration ceremonies, posters, newspaper articles, press releases, brochures, and seminars and open houses–introduces the CLCs to target groups of students, teachers, NGOs, women, health workers, and other "change agents," while ongoing marketing promotes usage by business people, local government officials, and others with resources. Clever marketing schemes are devised to attract hard-to-reach groups.

Training courses in using state-of-the-art ICTs are very popular and help ensure financial solvency. A sliding-scale fee structure for ICT use and training supports access for less advantaged groups and enables the CLCs to compete favorably with private-sector telecenters and training institutes.

Impact: It is expected that the long-term impact will be socially and economically beneficial. Ghanains in three regions–Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast–should benefit personally and professionally from the communication, networking, research, and information collection and dissemination functions that ICTs enable. Regional-level development should be enhanced by providing local officials with more efficient and varied options for communicating and sharing information, thus helping to decentralize official functions. ICTs should make the work of local leaders in the public, private, and voluntary sectors more efficient and effective. Access to global knowledge centers and resources should foster education for students, teachers, and lifelong learners. Special outreach to women and disadvantaged groups could help expand educational opportunities and equalize economic disparities.

CEDECOM telecenter

Business people will have access to global market chains and competitive prices, and the ICT presence should help launch spin-off businesses, such as software development, equipment repair, and the sale of peripherals, all of which are expected to bolster local economies in the long run. The demand for connectivity, increasing over time, should encourage ISP point-of-presence in areas currently not served. Running the CLCs supports the host NGOs' work by providing their constituents with new products and services, enhancing their reputation, and enabling NGO staff to gain valuable, new business skills.

Challenges: Infrastructure constraints, no point-of-presence ISPs in two target areas, and national telco costs limit consistent, affordable connectivity and require creative technical solutions, plus political and economic will. Limited availability of competent technical staff requires extensive, ongoing training, with the potential for expert staff to be lured away by more lucrative positions with private-sector telecenters and computer institutes. Despite special outreach campaigns, female usage rates lag behind those of males and require ongoing attention. For financial sustainability, CLCs must balance a desire to serve disadvantaged populations with the need to accommodate fee-paying groups. Once users become accustomed to ICT availablity, CLCs face a growing need for more equipment, more advanced hardware, more diverse software, and faster connectivity. Potential victims of their own success, the CLCs have to factor methods for expansion and equipment upgrades into their business plans.

Lessons Learned: At the outset, the specific technological infrastructure needed for the CLC to function must be determined, and the external funding agency must make an adequate financial investment to put it in place. The business plan for the CLC should be designed not only to meet the activity's objectives but also to ensure financial sustainability even after external funding ends. A variety of strategies for obtaining and generating income should be included in the initial business plan and should be revisited and revised, as appropriate, over time.

The NGO should undertake strategic planning to determine the impact the CLC will have on the group's mission, and the NGO's leadership and staff should be trained in the fundamental principals of business management, with an emphasis on the special requirements of information utilities. The CLC should be independently managed by the CLC manager, who should be empowered to make decisions on the basis of sound management criteria. Ongoing training for CLC staff ensures their competency and helps prevent attrition.

Resident Director Jonnie Akakpo launching a CLC

Within specific parameters, a CLC's objectives must be flexible enough so they can be modified, if necessary, according to operational realities revealed by monitoring. For the long term, it is important to help clients develop ICT skills by offering training programs, especially for new users. Gender equity in the use of CLCs will not be achieved without specific interventions to attain it.

Expect the operational maturity of the CLCs, the sophistication of CLC users, and the community's acceptance of the CLC to be progressive, not immediate. As CLCs mature, client usage patterns increase in complexity, requiring new training courses, more sophisticated equipment, and more diverse software. Careful usage monitoring is essential for adjusting business plans and offering new products and services so as to compete favorably with private telecenters and training institutes. Friendly and attentive staff, plus comfortable surroundings, convenient locations, and flexible operating hours keep clients coming back.

Prerequisites for success include providing targeted technical assistance, hiring a dynamic, competent, and clever project coordinator, and encouraging creative outreach for diffusion. NGOs can bring valuable resources to the effort, but those selected should be prepared to meet the challenge and able to attract users in their communities.